

Return to Liberators || Return to Witnesses

1st. Lt. William Cowling: Report from the Dachau Liberation Read the actual letter and report filed by 1st Lt. William Cowling on liberating Dachau. This section submitted by John Cowling, his son. Click on pictures to see full-size view of photos (4) taken at the liberation.



The Letter

28 April

Dear Folks:

Boy oh boy am I having a heck of a time trying to find time to write. We are really moving. My days have been consisting of getting up between 6:30 and 7:30 eating, throwing my stuff in a Jeep and taking off. When visiting the regiments and sometimes the battalions and then head for a new CP. By time we get into the new CP and set up it is 11 o'clock at night or later and I am so tired. I just hit the sack, so I really haven't had much time to write. I received the fruit cake the other day and boy was it good. That package contained all the right things. I have lost my chap stick and my lips were chapped so it really came in handy.



The Report

HEADQUARTERS 42D INFANTRY
DIVISION

2 May 1945

REPORT ON SURRENDER OF THE
GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMP
AT DACHAU:

On 29 April General Linden, Assistant Division Commander of the 42d Division, General Banfill of the Eight Air Force, and General Linden's aide, Lt. Cowling, and guards and drivers were enroute to the left flank of the Division in the area of the 222d Infantry, with the mission of locating Col. Downard's battalion of the 222d Infantry and pushing them on towards Munich. While passing through the city of Dachau a jeep bearing two newspaper reporters, a Stars and Stripes reporter and a Miss Higgins from the New York Herald Tribune, questioned the aide, Lt. Cowling, as to the location of the concentration camp near the city limits. The lieutenant could not give them the exact location and informed them that he did not believe any American troops had as yet occupied the camp. General Linden at this time directed the aide to continue on the road up towards the camp, while continuing to look for Col. Downard and at the same time take a

Well I was interrupted at this point and it is now the 30th of April and the very first minute I have had to write. Since I started this letter I have had the most, I suppose you would say, exciting, horrible and at the same time wonderful experience I have had ever or probably ever will have. When I tell it to you your probably won't believe all the details. I knew when I heard such stories back in the States I never believed them and now even after seeing with my own eyes, it is hard for me to believe it. Well, to go on with the story as you know we have been moving very rapidly and oftentimes the boss and I get into the towns just about the same time the front line troops do. Yesterday we started out to locate a company and a unit advancing down a road. Enroute we learned from civilians and two newspaper people that just off the main road was a concentration camp of Dachau, oldest largest and most notorious camp in Germany. These newspaper people were going up to see the camp so we decided to go up too.

We ride in a Jeep with

reading on the situation at the camp.



Lt. Cowling proceeded on up the road towards the camp. Upon approaching a railroad track a large number of box cars were observed on the siding, and upon looking back at the cars, which were open on one side, the lieutenant discovered that they were stacked with dead bodies. The lieutenant stopped his vehicle and the two generals and the aide made a quick inspection of the cars. All of the bodies were in an emaciated condition from starvation and many of the bodies showed signs of beating. Several were noted to have been shot through the head. The two newspaper reporters were there at the time. The General directed the aide to then proceed up the road towards the camp, which he did. As his jeep approached within a couple of hundred yards of the entrance, a German officer, a lieutenant, a German soldier, and a civilian wearing a Red Cross armband stepped around the corner of a building, carrying a white flag. The lieutenant, the guard, and the driver of the jeep dismounted and covered the officer as he approached. As the officer approached within a few feet of Lt. Cowling he asked if there was an American officer present. The lieutenant informed him that he was an officer and the German replied that he wished to surrender the camp. At this point, General Linden arrived and the lieutenant informed him that he wished to surrender the camp of Dachau to him and that approximately 100 SS guards still remained in the prison and that they were armed. These guards, however, had been ordered not to shoot the American soldiers but to keep only the prisoner's in and to keep them in check. The Red Cross man said there were approximately

a guard out ahead of the boys and we were several hundred yards ahead as we approached the Camp. The first thing we came to was a railroad track leading out of the Camp with a lot of open box cars on it. As we crossed the track and looked back into the cars the most horrible sight I have ever seen (up to that time) met my eyes. The cars were loaded with dead bodies. Most of them were naked and all of them skin and bones. Honest their legs and arms were only a couple of inches around and they had no buttocks at all. Many of the bodies had bullet holes in the back of their heads. It made us sick at our stomach and so mad we could do nothing but clench our fists. I couldn't even talk. We then moved on towards the Camp and my Jeep was still several hundred yards ahead. As we approached the main gate a German officer and a civilian wearing an International Red Cross band and carrying a white flag came out. We immediately filed out and I was just hoping he would make a funny move so I could hit the trigger of my tommy gun. He didn't however, and when he arrived abreast

40,000 inmates of the prison, many of whom were half-crazed. At this point small arms fire came from the left flank. The group took cover momentarily and the General had the German officer and the soldier stand in the open facing the fire. The fire soon let up, however, and the General sent the aide on up into the camp to get the situation. He also sent an officer, Major Avery, back to the 222d Infantry to get two companies of infantry up to the camp as soon as possible to take charge of it.

Lt. Cowling went through one gate of the camp and just off to the right of the gate about 50 yards observed a tower with German soldiers in the tower. Lt. Cowling called out to them to come down. Approximately 12 soldiers came down out of the tower and the lieutenant sent them on back with the General's guards. The lieutenant, one of the General's guards, and the two newspaper reporters then proceeded on to the entrance to the actual camp cantonment. As the jeep approached and then crossed a small moat surrounding the main camp, its path was blocked by a dead civilian square in the center of the road. The civilian had been shot in the face and from the looks of the body had been dead not more than 24 hours. A German soldier guiding the lieutenant got off the fender of the jeep and lifted the body out of the way. The jeep then moved up to the iron gate which was the entrance to the main camp enclosure. A guard house was on either side of the gate. The lieutenant did not notice anyone in either of the houses when he first arrived at the gate. Lt. Cowling opened the gate and entered the enclosure. The large enclosure just inside the gate was perfectly clear of any human being when the lieutenant entered the gate, and the two newspaper reporters also entered with the lieutenant. The lieutenant had been in the enclosure approximately a

of us he asked for an American officer. I informed him he was talking to one and he said he wished to surrender the camp to me.

About that time the General arrived and got the story from the German Lieutenant (that the Camp was still manned by German Guards who were armed but had orders not to shoot at us but only to keep the prisoners in check.) Well about that time somebody started shooting from over on our left flank and ducked but made the Germans stand in front of us. Finally the fire let up and we sent one of the guards back for a company of infantry. The newspaper people said they were going on into Camp and I got permission to go on with them with my guard leaving the others with the General. We went through one gate and spotted some Germans in a tower. I hollered in German for them to come to me and they did. I sent them back to the guards and General and got on the front of the newspaper people's Jeep and headed for the gate.

A man lay dead just in

minute and a half when people began pouring from the low, barrack type, black buildings. The people were thin, dirty, and half starved. They rushed to the American officer and the two newspaper reporters and attempted to shake their hands, kiss their hands or face, or just to touch their clothing. They even grabbed them and threw them up into the air, shouting in many different languages the whole time. Many of the men were crying and a good percentage of them were half-crazed with excitement and the brutal treatment which they had received while in the camp. The lieutenant finally managed to break free, return to the gate, and close it before more than one or two had gotten out. The people pushed against the gate and attempted to reach between the bars and shake the officer's hands or touch them. At that point the lieutenant noticed something in the window of the guard house to the left of the gate. The German officer was waving a white flag out of the window, which practically touched the lieutenant's shoulder. Lt. Cowling immediately went around and entered the guard house. Inside were two officers and six German soldiers. One of the officers asked if there was an American officer present and Lt. Cowling informed him that he was an officer. The German told the officer that he wished to surrender and wished safe conduct from himself and his men. The Germans were all armed with pistols and rifles. The German could speak a little English and Lt. Cowling had him place all the weapons outside the door and then remain in place inside the guard room. Lt. Cowling then went back outside the guard house and sent his driver back for the other guards.

By this time, the square was completely filled with thousands of yelling, screaming people. They were all crowded up to the edge of a ditch just inside the barbed wire

front of the gate. A bullet through his head. One of the Germans we had taken lifted him out of the way and we dismounted and went through the gate into a large cement square about 800 squares surrounded by low black barracks and the whole works enclosed by barbed wire. When we entered the gate not a soul was in sight. Then suddenly people (few could call them that) came from all directions. They were dirty, starved skeletons with torn tattered clothes and they screamed and hollered and cried. They ran up and grabbed us. Myself and the newspaper people and kissed our hands, our feet and all of them tried to touch us. They grabbed us and tossed us into the air screaming at the top of their lungs. I finally managed to pull myself free and get to the gate and shut it so they could not get out. Then I felt something brush my shoulder and I turned to the left of the two block house guarding the gate to find a white flag fluttering square in my face and on the end of it inside the house eight Germans.

fence enclosing the encampment. General Linden arrived at the gate just as several of the people threw themselves across the ditch and onto the barbed wire. The wire was charged with electricity and those on the wire died instantly. Lt. Cowling personally saw three of them die this way. By this time several inmates of the prison, many of whom were infected with typhus, lice, and possibly other diseases, had managed to hoist themselves up to the windows of the guard house and were pouring out of those doors. General Linden directed his guards to get the people personally pushed a number of them back into the enclosure. Lt. Cowling went back into the guard house, got the eight German prisoners, brought them outside, and took them to the opposite side of the moat. About this time Col. Fellenz of the 1st Ba 222d arrived with several of his men. There were also some members of the 45th Division present. German guards still remained in all of the towers surrounding the prison, with the exception of the one previously mentioned and two right at the gate. As some of the men of Col. Fellenz's battalion and some of the men of the 45th Division approached one of the towers, some of the guards fired into the crowd which was attempting to break through the fence. The doughboys of the two infantry divisions shot the SS guards who had commenced the prison. In the meantime an officer of Col. Fellenz's battalion had cut the switch which charged the fence surrounding the prison, to prevent any more of the half-crazed inmates from dying from its electric charge.

There was still considerable disorder at this time and large numbers of prisoners were attempting to climb over the fence or come through the gates. A few American soldiers had a good deal of difficulty in attempting to make the prisoners, who were of all nationalities,



I looked around the house and entered. I got the same question, are you an American Officer and said Yes. They turned over their arms, pistols and rifles to me and I told them to sit tight. I then went back outside and sent my driver to get the Jeep. Then I went back into the Germans and took their arms and sent the pistols to my Jeep (I gave all away but two). When I came back out the General was there and the people inside the enclosure were all in the large square shouting and crying. Then a terrible thing happened. Some of them in their frenzy charged the barbed wire fence to get out and embrace us and touch us. Immediately they were killed by an electric charge running through the fence. I personally saw three die that way. Our troops arrived about that time and took the rest of the guards, Germans (who during all this time had remained in the towers around the prison.) A number of them and I sincerely regret that I took the eight prisoners that I did after a trip through

understand that they must remain inside the enclosure until the Americans could arrange proper facilities for release. In one or two instances it was necessary for officers to give orders for the men to fire over the heads of the inmates to gain their attention and get them back inside the enclosure. In one instance, just as the prisoners were pushed back inside the enclosure, an enlisted man of the 45th Division picked up a number of chains, shackles, etc. which had been used to chain the prisoners, and he rattled them at the crowd. General Linden ordered the man, who was standing directly in front of him, to drop the chain at once as they were causing increased excitement among the prisoners and they were surging forward in an attempt to get through and grab the chains and again break out of the confines of the enclosure. The man, however, disobeyed the General's order and turned his back on him, raising the chains above his head and shaking them again. In an attempt to get the man's attention, General Linden tapped the man on the helmet with a stick he was carrying. The man turned and the General again directed him to drop his chains. This time the man dropped the chains and walked off, although he was very sullen, showing no military discipline or respect. The sight of the chains had made the crowd again surge forward and some of them were again streaming through the gate. It was impossible to hear above the noise and hub-bub. General Linden ordered the men back at the point of his pistol and a captain of the 222d Infantry fired his rifle into the air to get their attention. The men again were pushed back inside the enclosure and a semblance of order was restored, although it was necessary for the next hour or so to continue a close vigilance to keep members of the crowd from breaking through the fence and out of the enclosure.

Camp which I shall describe in a minute.

Well the General attempted to get the thing organized and an American Major who had been held in the Camp since September came out and we set him up as head of the prisoners. He soon picked me to quiet the prisoners down and explain to them that they must stay in the Camp until we could get them deloused, and proper food and medical care. Several newspaper people arrived about that time and wanted to go through the Camp so we took them through with a guide furnished by the prisoners. The first thing we came to were piles and piles of clothing, shoes, pants, shirts, coats, etc. Then we went into a room with a table with flowers on it and some soap and towels. Another door with the word showers lead off of this and upon going through this room it appeared to be a shower room but instead of water, gas came out and in two minutes the people were dead. Next we went next door to four large ovens where they cremated the dead. Then we were taken to piles of dead. There were from two to fifty people in a

The next hour was spent by General Linden and his group, including Col. Fellenz and some elements of his battalion and a Colonel Sprague of the 45th Division and some of his men, in attempting to calm the crowd and make them realize they would have to remain in the prison until they could get proper food and medical attention, deloused, etc. A major of the American army who was a prisoner of the camp and a lieutenant commander of the British navy, a Canadian officer and a Belgian officer volunteered their services in setting up a committee within the prisoners themselves to help in restoring order and organizing the camp in preparation for the release of its prisoners. Finally, with the aid of these people, the crowd was calmed down and order was restored.

An Associated Press reporter and another reporter requested permission from General Linden to go through the camp on an inspection. General Linden consented and offered to accompany the two reporters. Lt. Cowling and one of the guards went through with the General and the two reporters. The major who had been a prisoner provided a guard for the party. The first place the group visited was a large yard in which piles of assorted clothing were stacked. In one pile was shoes, in another pants, and so on. We were then shown a room which looked something similar to a reception room, and off it was another room with the marking "Showers" on it. Actually it was a gas chamber used by the Germans to kill the prisoners. The camp also contained four large ovens in which the bodies were cremated. As the group moved through the camp the prisoners moved to either side to make a pathway, but many reached out to touch the Americans' clothing or to attempt to shake our hands. Many of them were crying and they were all shouting and yelling. The guide took the group to

pile allnaked, starved and dead. There must have been about 1,000 dead in all.

Then we went through a building where fifty men were guarded in a room the size of your kitchen. There were hundreds of typhus cases and all through the Camp men cheered us and tried to touch us.

Incidentally many of the dead and living showed signs of horrible beatings and torture. It is unbelievable how any human can treat others as they were treated. One wasted little man came up and touched my sleeve and kissed my hand. He spoke perfect English and I asked him if he were American. He said no, Jewish and that he was one of the very few left that thousands had been killed. He had been there six years. He was twenty-eight years old and looked to be sixty years old. The German I took prisoner are very fortunate they were taken before I saw the Camp. I will never take another German prisoner armed or unarmed. How can they expect to do what they have done and simply say I quit and go scot free. I know now why our men kick and abuse the German

numerous piles of bodies which were stacked between the various buildings throughout the camp. These bodies were in piles of anywhere from 2 to 50. All of the bodies showed signs of starvation and were mere skeletons, and many of them showed signs of beating. The barracks were dirty, low, squat buildings with bunks stacked to the ceiling, four high, and so close together that a man could hardly squeeze between them, and in many cases probably had to crawl over them to get into them. In one building the people were all typhus cases and many of them lay on the bare floor, while a few had dirty straw pallets. The men tried to raise up and smile at the Americans or wave at them, but most of them were too weak to do more than look in their direction.

The party then returned to the outside of the enclosure. By this time order was restored; the German guards had either been killed or taken prisoner and the Americans had taken over the camp. The General and the rest of his party then left the camp and returned to the 222d Infantry CP.

The General returned to the camp a short time later to be certain that it was well under control and that things were going smoothly. The 42d Division was given the responsibility of the 32-odd prisoners inside the enclosure and 45th Division was to take care of the buildings on the ground outside the enclosure. The General remained there until he was certain that Col. Fellenz had things well in hand and then left, the time being approximately 2130 and returned to the 222d CP and from there went back to the Division CP.

WILLIAM J. COWLING III 1st Lt., ADC
Aide to Asst. Div. Comdr.

prisoners. They are not fit to live.

Well, that's my story. A day I will never forget. It will get a lot of publicity and you may see General Linden's name connected with Dachau but you can know in your own mind's that it was your son who was the first American soldier to enter the famous Camp of Dachau. I know that sounds like bragging but I only say it because it is true and I know that the story won't come out that was but several thousand prisoners will remember me. Incidentally there was 32,000 prisoners in the Camp. They were Polish, Jewish, French, German and even American. Well I must stop now. The next time I write I hope I can say that I got my first German and I don't mean prisoner.

Owe the Germans a lot now.

Incidentally, your griping about my going to the South Pacific. I have only been in the Army a couple of years. Some of these people were in the hell hole of Dachau for years. If I spend ten years in the Army during war I

will never go through
what those people go
through. Even if I were
killed, I would be lucky
compared to those
people. So if you still
feel the jitters
remember the people of
Dachau and think how
lucky I am no matter
what happens.

We will write and I
will give you the rest
of the story when I get
home.

Love,
Bill

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